

**Graphic Narratives in the Secondary Classroom**

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**By**

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### Abstract

Graphic Narratives (a term used interchangeably with comic books and graphic novels) have been a traditionally maligned medium within literature, especially in regard to professional pedagogy in secondary education. However, many scholars and professional educators have recently spoken out about the richness and possibility for cognitive growth within this medium and its use in the secondary classroom. I use this thesis to analyze their arguments and plead with professional educators everywhere to make curricular adjustments based on the inclusion of such materials. This thesis is organized based on my exploration of graphic narratives as a means of scaffolding, graphic narratives as multicultural literature, and graphic narratives as a means of engaging struggling readers.

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The challenges facing the secondary English teacher at the present are nearly too numerous to count. The current pedagogy has perpetuated a sizeable proportion of students reading below grade level, a stubborn curriculum filled with inaccessible classics that students can neither comprehend nor find relevant to their lives, a literary canon of authors that only reflects one dominant race and culture, and a classroom in which many students remain unengaged and thus show an overwhelming sense of apathy toward their education in general. A newcomer to the profession of education might gawk at such enormous stumbling blocks on the road to achieving meaningful learning experiences for students, but there is an option that can help remedy these issues: the introduction of comic books and graphic novels to the current standard curriculum. These media can help scaffold challenging content as well as reading skills for struggling readers, introduce refreshing new narratives within multicultural literature by introducing students to the experiences of other people groups, and engage students who simply struggle with caring about their coursework by providing an exciting alternative to the traditional novel. The teaching professional needs only to examine his or her learning goals and implement these types of texts to witness students' growth as learners.

### **Graphic Narratives as a Means of Scaffolding**

While state standards and traditional goals provide well-intentioned learning objectives for students, many of the texts used from the traditional canon are extremely difficult for students to access and grow from. This predicament places a great deal of unnecessary stress on teachers as they attempt to help students read these worn out texts. There is also constant pressure of standardized testing scores and school board mandates. Teachers are

under an unprecedented amount of stress in regard to student achievement. As a result, they are scrambling to push students to perform well in the area of reading skills when in reality, these students need a great deal of scaffolding before they can hope to succeed with these demanding texts. This is how a curriculum change could be extremely beneficial to all parties involved. The use of a far more accessible text, such as a comic book or graphic novel, could genuinely aid students in becoming stronger readers and confident learners. According to educator and graphic novel expert Gretchen Schwartz:

While the traditional focus on print texts remains significant, worthy traditional goals need to be coupled with new aims to direct the curriculum. The graphic novel offers new ways to achieve traditional goals and serve as new sites of possibility across the curriculum for educators willing to learn along with their students. (Schwartz 54)

Schwartz makes a key point in the phrase “for educators willing to learn along with their students.” Curricular changes such as this will force educators outside their respective comfort zones, but these changes also will bring about gains in their students’ learning. Teachers must be willing to step outside the comfortable lesson plans that they have used for years in order to achieve different results. They don’t need to change their goals or standards; they simply need new ways of achieving them. In some cases, teachers may use comic books or graphic novels as a supplement to the classic texts they plan on teaching.

Schwartz also references *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels* by James Carter, who is also in favor of this approach: “A range of educators suggest using graphic novels as a bridge to the classics in the English classroom, pairing Dickens’



*Oliver Twist* and Will Eisner's graphic novel, *Fagin the Jew*, for example," (Schwartz 55). Perhaps such a curricular modification would not only increase comprehension, but *enhance* it. Graphic narratives have the power to truly make these texts come to life for students, if used appropriately.

The professional discourse on the use of comic books and graphic novels in the classroom is trending positively because researchers are realizing the potential of such media in a changing classroom. A traditional canonical text such as *Oliver Twist* might be challenging or inaccessible to struggling readers, but when paired with a graphic novel that also enhances and enriches the narrative, it could allow students a greater understanding of the text overall. Graphic novels essentially provide a means for students who lack complex literacy skills to access difficult texts (a term which would describe many titles within the traditional canon). In order to enhance students' learning and reading abilities, new literacies must be explored. The cognitive process of literacy must be strengthened. In addition, Schwartz argues "Curriculum promoting new literacies allows students to challenge the status quo, encourages students to work together, and values the process of learning as much as the outcome," (58). The status quo is failing students in terms of achieving effective learning. These types of educational reforms can open the floodgates for students to start valuing learning itself, as opposed to valuing a test score or grade point average.

The possibilities of curricular modifications with graphic narratives are endless. Just in Schwartz's article, one can find multiple examples of effectively incorporating graphic novels. *Castle Waiting* by Linda Medley "humorously challenges beauty and gender assumptions," and *The Cartoon History of the Modern World* by Larry Gonick

“challenges the usual Eurocentric view of the conquest of the ‘New World.’” She even describes a remarkably effective lesson in which students work with a single panel from *The Golems Might Swing* by James Sturm:

The assignment asks the student to choose a single panel.... First, they must describe the visual and textual elements within the panel, and second, they must interpret possible deeper meaning in those elements. We spend time in class discussing how images signify: composition (the arrangement of materials within a space), viewing angles and distance, shading (including the use of color), use of text, style of drawing, size and shape of the panel, and type of border.’ Importantly, the students identify characteristics and debate meanings as they learn the conventions of a new medium. (Schwartz 60)

These same conventions can help students acquire reading skills that they don’t currently have. Many students struggle with visualizing texts: seeing characters, action, setting, and chronology of events. Comic books and graphic novels, being visual as well as textual media, are set up to strengthen these areas of cognition.

Scottish educator Shari Sabeti comments on this phenomenon of cognitive strengthening: “[Graphic narratives.] visual dimension was referred to repeatedly by pupils as part of their intrinsic value, not just in terms of time as discussed above, but also with regard to its capacity to involve the reader” (840). Comparing graphic novels to non-graphic novels, one student noted that a reader might certainly feel immersed in a good

book, but it may prove very difficult for him or her to genuinely feel as if they are in the room as the action unfolds. Graphic narratives provide this feeling.

The uniquely visual quality of comics and graphic novels works at multiple levels of cognition to provide students with an extremely accessible, yet rich text. Mississippi State professor and librarian Elizabeth Downey comments on this quality: “[Graphic novels] illustrate cognitive and literary concepts resulting in stronger comprehension of the materials,” (183). This phenomenon attracts not only struggling readers, but also visual learners who struggle with print text. The problem is, visual learners no longer represent a small percentage of a classroom. More and more students are now visual learners because more and more media are focusing on visual content. Downey elaborates on this point:

Today’s students have had a childhood filled with the rapid pace and visual stimulation of television and video games, and they therefore seek the same characteristics in their reading materials: a scaled-down approach featuring short narratives and graphic indicators. (183)

Downey’s observations are spot-on with youth today, and graphic narratives have characteristics that are uniquely suited to solve such a dilemma. In many cases, students have been conditioned to take in information through visuals along with text. They may even prefer to do so. Teachers must be sensitive to the learning styles of their students in order to know how to best instruct them, and many of those students will probably say that they prefer some sort of visual element to their texts. To deny struggling readers that possibility would be to shun what many would consider best practice.



Also, as many teachers accustomed to making accommodations in their classrooms would agree, many such accommodations actually benefit all students, not just those who need them:

Some students simply are not capable of conjuring images in their mind from reading the text and therefore are dependent on visual cues; graphic novels provide images that help the students interpret the text as well as denote particular thematic connotations, purposes, or ideas...Beyond simply offering an option to visual learners, all students may benefit from the effect reading graphic novels has on comprehension skills. (Downey 183)

Graphic novels offer opportunities for cognitive growth that simply cannot be found in the traditional novel, especially in terms of meeting students at the level of cognition at which they currently operate. Students would greatly benefit from pictorial storytelling contained in graphic novels, something Will Eisner has dubbed, "Sequential Art." He explains, "The perception of sequential art requires more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone," (Downey 183). It requires more complex cognition because students are not only interpreting words. They are making meaning from expression, body language, action, space, color, shading, and text. Current best practice in secondary English would dictate that students should be reading a variety of texts and styles, all while growing in literacy level. Graphic novels can help support growth in plot, characterization, timing in dialogue, scenery, foreshadowing, and the use of dialect.

In addition to developing literacy with these basic narrative elements, comics and graphic novels can help students make vast gains in the areas of inference making at the secondary level. Instructors could use this information in strategically aiding junior high students who are starting to deal with more complex texts. In his article, *Spaces Invested with Content*, comic expert David Low discusses the important cognitive process that occurs as children turn pages in children's books. During this process, young readers are "required to 'fill in natural gaps created by the page breaks to make meaning and to construct a continuous narrative' by 'speculat[ing] on what might have happened 'between' the pages'" (Low, 369). Essentially, children are taught the important cognitive process of making inferences as they simply turn pages. The mind naturally wants to connect those pages as a coherent narrative is constructed in the brain. Furthermore, Low adds that this process "positions [children] as co-authors" (369). By this, he means that children become active partners in the meaning making process while reading graphic narratives, holding a cognitive conversation with the author. This adds another intriguing layer to the prospect for growth in overall cognition in reading.

Low continues by arguing that this cognitive process may be further developed by the use of comic books in the secondary classroom. He claims that comics provide a medium that is "analogous to picture books in terms of gap-filling, and which is relatively common, inexpensive, and easy enough for schools to procure en masse, both in paper and digital formats," (370). He adds that comics "are often written with a teen or adult audience in mind, and are thus highly suitable for studying the individual and social meaning-making processes of older schoolchildren and adolescents within numerous gaps or 'spots of indeterminacy.'" Comics afford an opportunity for the inference making

process contained within children's books to be replicated within more mature content. This could be a huge opening for teachers to expand students' learning processes in terms of metacognition.

### **Graphic Narratives as Multicultural Literature**

Another challenge that educators face today is diversifying the curriculum in terms of multicultural texts. One of the most glaring and widely discussed issues with the traditional canon is that it was written predominantly by white males. There is a legitimate need within the American curricula to reflect all American culture, not only white American culture. American historian Ronald Takaki says in his article *A Different Mirror*:

What happens when historians leave out many of America's peoples?  
What happens, to borrow the words of Adrienne Rich, 'when someone with the authority of a teacher,' describes our society, and 'you are not in it?' Such an experience can be disorienting—'a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.' (348)

What Takaki describes is the reality for too large proportion of American students studying whitewashed textbooks and literature. Students of color rarely hear voices in the classroom that reflect their own, and therefore do not see themselves in history or art. They inevitably feel out of place in the classroom and, on a larger scale, in their country. This is a huge problem that graphic narratives can also help fix.

American classrooms risk a serious disservice to their students by not including texts that reflect their ethnic identities. As educators seek out new ethnically diverse texts to introduce to their curricula, they will find that comics and graphic novels offer many viable options to meet their needs.

It has been well-documented that Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* can easily be taught in the secondary school as a Holocaust narrative and source of insight into the Jewish identity. In his article *Beyond Maus: Other Holocaust Graphic Novels*, Henry Gonshak reviews three other Holocaust narratives taking the form of the graphic novel. Of these three, he claims that Will Eisner (creator of *The Spirit* comic)'s *A Life Force* contains the most literary merit and richness. He describes the first of the three novels with the following:

Its hero is Jacob Shtarkah, a German-Jewish immigrant struggling through the Depression, co-owner of a local lumberyard, who receives a letter from the daughter, Hilda, of an old flame back in Germany...Hilda's letter relates the Nazis' growing persecution of German Jews: first, the Nuremberg Laws, which stripped Jews of citizenship, and then the government-sponsored anti-Jewish riots on *Kristallnacht*, which claims Frieda's husband. Fearing that her sixty-year-old mother won't survive, Hilda begs Jacob to help Frieda emigrate to America. (Gonshak 60)

Not only does Gonshak claim that *A Life Force* contains legitimate Holocaust content that rings true alongside many surviving historical accounts, but it also is told using rich literary techniques unique to the graphic novel:

In a nice touch copied in his later graphic novels, Eisner places the correspondence on the page, drawing his strips around these letters, a technique which enhances the drama as Jacob (still madly in love with his former sweetheart) battles through the endless red tape demanded by the U.S. Immigration Service in order to book passage for Frieda to New York. (60)

It is through the use of this technique that Eisner seamlessly weaves together the narratives of the Holocaust victims with those of Jewish-American immigrants. Both narratives are worth telling in schools in order to diversify the curriculum.

*A Life Force* also, like many other multicultural texts, offers truly rich content in the way of asking deep philosophical questions about man's place in the universe and the human condition:

At the graphic novel's start, Jacob is stricken with a mild heart attack that proves a shock to mind as well as body, inducing, as he lies sprawled in an alley beside a writhing cockroach, a philosophical meditation on the relationship between human beings and insects: 'Either Man created God ... or, God created Man. In either case, both Man and cockroach are in serious trouble! Because staying alive seems to be the only thing on which everybody agrees!' (Gonshak 61)



The scene is evocative of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, another work of the traditional canon that students often struggle with. However, this single scene gets at the root of deep philosophical schools of thought that are ripe for exploration in the classroom.

This high-level subject matter would lend itself well to a junior or senior level literature course, raising deep questions about humanity and the philosophy of existence itself. This is only one of many texts on Jewish identity that could be utilized within the multicultural curriculum.

According to Michael D. Boatright's article, *Graphic Journeys: Graphic Novels' Representations of Immigrant Experiences*, multiple options also lie in wait for educators who want to include narratives on the Asian American experience. The first of his selected critiques is *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan. Tan's graphic novel is one that affords a unique reading opportunity: it is composed entirely of images with no traditional text common to other graphic novels.

The realm of wordless books opens countless opportunities for expression and meaning potential. One such wordless graphic novel, *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007), presents a surrealistic vision of one immigrant family's experience, narrated without worded signposts to shepherd the reader through the story line. (Boatright 470)

Just as Boatright asserts, a novel composed entirely of images would certainly challenge and eventually strengthen students' meaning making processes. This text would be a visual learner's dream, while challenging all students to read outside their

comfort zone. The novel follows a young Asian man who leaves his family for opportunities in America and, after much struggle and adjustment, eventually saves enough money to bring his family to his new home. Tan was himself a child of immigrant parents, and so he explicitly states that many of the images are modeled after museum and archival photographs of Ellis Island at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As far as narratives of immigrant experiences go, this novel would be a fine addition to any rigorous curriculum.

The second selection up for critique in Boatright's article is Henry Toshitaka Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904–1924*. This novel follows the journey of four young Japanese men who immigrate to the United States. Originally intentioned as a newspaper weekly serial, Kiyama's book is made up of 52 individual, black-and-white comics, each with eight panels. The characters exploits are the center of action as they are introduced to San Francisco in the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The novel deals with more of the negative connotations of immigration like racism, difficult assimilation, and hardship relating to language issues:

The four young characters, opting for American names to ease integration into San Franciscan society, become victims of bank fraud, lose jobs because of their limited English capabilities, and fall prey to exploitative employers who take advantage of their inexperience in the American labor force. ( Boatright 472)

Tan's artistic style is intriguingly purposeful in its simplicity. He chose to craft the characters using simple lines and circles instead of incorporating realistic detail. "When you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face, you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see yourself," (Boatright 472). This style warrants interaction as the reader places himself in Tan's cartoon world. This process could lend itself to further strengthening the meaning making process of young readers, while providing them with a look into the experiences of Asian Americans.

The third of Boatright's critiques addresses *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. An increasingly popular choice amongst teachers with an eye for multicultural literature, Yang's novel follows Jin Wang, a fictional, second-generation American-born Chinese male dealing with identity and acceptance issues while growing up in San Francisco. As Jin's story is being told, Yang also narrates the connected tales of the Monkey King, a Chinese mythological hero, and Chin-Kee, an exaggerated representation of negative Chinese stereotypes within an American sitcom. As the novel progresses, Yang weaves these narratives together and plays them off one another to highlight particular themes and messages.

One of the prominent ideas Yang uses in his coming-of-age narrative involves the protagonist struggling with his own skin color. He develops a crush for a girl at school and feels he must change his appearance in order for her to like him. According to Boatright, the development of this idea in the text could allow teachers to "draw connections with and interrogate Jin Wang's desire to transform his physical appearance to the hegemony of whiteness as a socially constructed preferred skin color in the United

States,” (473). Yang also uses the character Chin-Kee to illustrate many negative stereotypes traditionally associated with Asian Americans, while also using his cousin Danny’s embarrassment of him to show how many Asian American immigrant youths attempt to hide this part of themselves. Boatright also asserts that teachers could use these parts of the novel to “critique such immigrant identity issues with their students by engaging in dialogues that trouble the unstable identity construct of a second-generation immigrant that, in turn, question privileged as well as marginalized second-generation immigrant identity constructs,” (473). Good multicultural literature includes those texts that not only add a different voice to the classroom, the voice of the “other,” but introduce an entirely different experience to the classroom and initiate a different conversation on the subjects that matter in our society. This is one of those texts. Overall, this text would be an excellent addition to a curriculum interested in discussing the immigrant identity.

For teachers wishing to both incorporate comic books and multicultural literature into their classroom, contemporary trends in the medium itself (especially within the genre of superhero comics) can be studied, as well as individual, broader topics. For instance, Marvel Comics has recently rebooted some of their flagship titles, swapping beloved white heroes for a newly diversified ethnic lineup. Two such titles include *Ultimate Spider Man* and *Ms. Marvel*. Marvel’s new Spider Man is a half Black, half Hispanic high school student named Miles Morales. The new Ms. Marvel is a young Muslim girl in New York. The significance of such creative changes cannot be overstated: these are arguably Marvel’s most celebrated, well-known, and lucrative male and female characters. Marvel made an intentional choice to diversify their lineup in

terms of minority representation, and the response has not been totally positive. On the Fan Page of Brian Michael Bendis' *Ultimate Spider Man Issue No. 1*, Marvel posted several fans' thoughts on the character change—both positive and negative thoughts. There was an overwhelming sense of disappointment from many die-hard fans. Some of the major backlash included:

In this you didn't just betray the fans but you betrayed your own character  
...I am extremely disappointed and offended that you killed off one of  
your greatest characters of all time for the sole reason of diversity...There  
are a lot of comic characters you can pass the torch with. Not Peter Parker.  
Not ever...Unless Peter Parker comes back in the old Red and Blue, I will  
never touch another Marvel comic! (Bendis 19).

What this response shows is that Marvel's choice to diversify was both a bold and exceptionally unpopular one. Some of their most die-hard fans wrote in expressing their disappointment. Amongst the feedback on the page there stands a couple of encouraging responses, including: "Now, today's generation of young readers will get to live in a world where ANYONE can be Spider Man," (Bendis 19). This comment seems more in line with Marvel's vision for the creative change. However, whether this was a business savvy move for Marvel or not, it was more than just an aesthetic adjustment to the hero.

Upon reading *Ultimate Spider Man* number one, the audience is introduced to Miles Morales as a character; he doesn't even get his powers until the very end of the issue. Morales represents a great number of minority inner city youths in that he does not come from a wealthy family. In fact, his mother and father are desperately hoping he can



be selected by the city's lottery system in order to be registered at a quality charter school in the area free of charge. He is the last name called. His parents rejoice, and his mother squeezes him to herself, exclaiming "Oh—Oh, you have a chance. Oh my God, you have a chance" (Bendis 10). The subsequent panels show the sad and angry tears of other high school students whose hopes have just been dashed. The issue delves into the experience of the inner city minority youth in a way that could be all-too-relatable for some students of lower socioeconomic status. Such a comic could also provide fascinating discussion on the topic of what makes a hero. Marvel is boldly stating that ethnicity is not a factor in determining one's heroic status. For a medium that has traditionally seen so much scrutiny, Marvel is making it a point to accurately reflect the culture in which these heroes reside. This is a characteristic of centuries of canonical texts.

All in all, comics and graphic novels afford countless opportunities to diversify the curriculum in terms of minority representation and ethnic diversity. Not only do they feature characters of different non-white populations, but also they represent entire experiences of minority cultures. Professional educators would do well to include such texts in their efforts to diversify the traditional curriculum.

### **Graphic Narratives as a Means of Engaging Reluctant Readers**

A third obstacle that many secondary English teachers face on a daily basis is that of engaging students who show little interest in their content area or find no incentive for reading. Many professional educators will say that engaging students is always half the battle. With this in mind, comic books and graphic novels become an even more attractive option for teachers wishing to meaningfully engage their students. Recent

studies done by leaders in the field, namely Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, have yielded promising results, showing that graphic novels typically attract male readers who are reluctant to read other materials. "The Maryland Comic Book Initiative has banked on comics to increase gains in reading motivation, interest, and comprehension among students...Scholars such as Stephen Cary, Stephen D. Krashen, and Jun Liu have shown how including sequential art [including graphic novels] aids ESL populations" (Schwartz 55).

There has been a shift in media that may explain many students' lack of interest in print materials. Schwartz refers to it as the "Digital Age," (54). She argues that today's schools are struggling to catch up with the literacy of current society:

'As much as the public might wistfully long for the little red schoolhouse of times past, there is no going back to a world defined only by the printed and spoken word.' Not only do new technologies offer new sources of information, however; they communicate in new ways. Still, American secondary schools continue to emphasize print, often at the expense of new media. Technology *has* made communications new again while schools work in old ways. (56)

Here, Schwartz refers to one of the numerous ways in which American schools are simply trapped in the past, afraid of moving forward or upsetting the status quo. Print materials are what is comfortable, so they are what is most used. Meanwhile, the world outside of the four walls of the classroom is progressing, and students are living,

breathing, communicating, and learning in that world. Essentially, the world of the classroom does not match the world around them.

Comics and graphic novels also offer reluctant readers the chance that many of them have been longing for: to challenge the traditional canon of “old, boring books.” Students can be refreshed in their reading by works that are engaging and challenging in many areas of cognition. Schwartz argues:

Students need opportunities to question the literary canon, to think about why some texts are considered ‘classics’ and others not, and question the difference between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. In other words, students go beyond skills to tackle difficult questions involving history, culture, and power. Versaci says, ‘In asking and answering these questions—the central one being, perhaps, ‘What is literature?’—students and all readers can begin to look beyond labels and articulate what constitutes true art to them. (59-60)

In other words, comics and graphic novels have the power to *transcend* the curriculum: to make students think *why* classrooms read the texts they read, or *why* they discuss the writers they discuss. Like Schwartz claims, it makes them grapple with the question of “What is art?”

Such questioning invokes an important process in critical thinking and may work to truly engage students in their learning and get them thinking about their education through a broader lens. However, these lofty questions do not need to be answered in one

day or in a single lesson. Downey advises three separate approaches in using these texts to help engage readers.

The first approach is the cross-curricular approach, which pairs content with that of a history or social studies class and uses titles that discuss political or social issues. A second strategy is using graphic novels to complement traditional texts in order to enhance comprehension and analysis. "One could link Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* with Katherine Arnoldi's *The Amazing True Story of a Single Teenage Mom*; or assign Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* with the comic *Truth: Red White and Black*" (Downey 184). The third approach is to use Contact Zone Theory. According to this theory, teachers and students alike are tasked with examining current events and controversial issues from a variety of viewpoints and belief systems and then hold a discussion armed with those views.

While these are great options for helping students meaningfully engage with learning and reading, they are rather large in scale. For teachers looking to simply experiment with graphic narratives, there are alternatives. Similar to Versaci's single-panel lesson, Ian Carlson begins teaching comics in his Advanced English class by "showing them an image from a graphic novel outside the context of the novel itself, and asks the students their observations" (Downey 184). This strategy can be used to frontload the skills necessary for reading comic books, as well as frontload the comic itself. A great single panel from a comic or graphic novel could truly draw students in and pique their interest before charging forward with the rest of the text. This strategy would look exactly like a lesson in which the teacher would have students examine an

artwork. It is the same type of literacy, except in this case the art is not removed from the text, and it in fact plays a huge part in communicating the ideas of the writer/artist team.

However, the incorporation of comic books and graphic novels in the secondary classroom could mean something more revolutionary. In fact, it should. University of Pennsylvania researcher David Low puts it like this:

The medium of comics provides an opportune departure from alphabetic print texts' historical monopoly over upper elementary, middle, and high school language arts classrooms, and comes at a time when technological and cultural paradigm shifts are diversifying the ways that information is regularly transmitted, received, and interpreted. We have all unavoidably entered what is being hailed as 'The Age of Images,' in which 'the primary literacy of the twenty-first century will be visual: pictures, graphics, images of every kind.' (370)

Low describes the world we live in today, the world that students are experiencing outside the four walls of the classroom. It's quite an exciting world, one filled with learning opportunities that teachers are not taking advantage of. Low continues:

In such an age, it is no longer sufficient for curriculum designers to overwhelmingly value the traditional practices of reading and writing linear alphabetic text while thinking of images as merely supplementary clarifiers of meaning. Indeed, in these times, images (and their spatial



arrangements) carry an ever-expanding communicative weight in various mediatized forms, all of which demand critical analysis. (Low 370)

Perhaps why many teachers are afraid of these pedagogical changes are because this type of literacy “isn’t in the standards.” On the contrary, Low argues, this literacy could heighten every other area of literacy in a child’s cognitive domain precisely *because* it includes all kinds of literacy. In short, alphabetic print literacy could be raised by exploring visual-spatial, sequential art.

Low hits the nail on the head by vocalizing the true potential of this pedagogical change: to empower students to read the modern world around them, and to have their schoolwork match the culture in which they live. This creates relevancy. Relevancy drives engagement. Not long after Low makes this crucial point, he shines a light on the biggest challenge this new way of thinking will face:

‘The Age of Images’ is concurrent with ‘The Age of High-Stakes Standardized Testing and Accountability.’ Throughout the United States the dominant practice for school reading curriculums, under political pressure, is to define and measure students’ literacy predominantly as textual fluency, consisting of ‘literal recall, decoding, reading accuracy, reading rate, or vocabulary knowledge.’ (370-371)

This type of educational reform will of course be met with the tension of the current standardized testing mentality. It appears that all educational reform will need to undergo this hurdle. The point of it all is that this type of curricular change would be

*worth it.* The opportunity for students to meaningfully engage with their reading, perhaps permanently, should trump the need for higher test scores. The opportunity for students to learn reading skills that can be immediately applied to their lives should be worth it, compared to learning skills to take a test that holds no relevancy in their world, aside from what the state government says. Low expresses the danger of allowing the current mentality to continue:

Failure to adopt a pedagogy of multi-literacies will only create a further gap between what kinds of literacies students interact with at home or at work and those they interact with at school...Outside of the classroom, the world is already immersed in reading print-text literacies alongside image literacies. (Low 371)

The gap between the classroom and the real world is only increasing as the focus on raising test scores is increased. Teachers must learn to stretch what time they currently have devoted to their curriculum to make the greatest gains in their students' literacy. Comic books and graphic novels could bring about those gains.

### **A Call to Action**

The draw of incorporating comic books and graphic novels is high. If professional educators were to adopt such changes, gains in students' literacy would be vast compared to gains made by traditional canonical texts. The opportunities for scaffolding difficult texts or meeting struggling readers where they are currently are innumerable. There are

many attractive options for incorporating multicultural writers, artists, and content through this change. The opportunities for increased engagement and educational reform could truly change the landscape of education, if teachers would only be willing to try such changes.

The potential for increased learning in the classroom overall should be the biggest draw for educators and administrators alike. The only real obstacle is the same challenge that all curricular reform will face: the current focus on standardized test scores. Perhaps some failing schools might be tempted to hold off on changes such as these until a time in which their collective scores are higher. This would be a mistake. The longer they wait, the greater the gap between students' learning in the classroom and students' learning from the culture surrounding them will be. Professional educators should start making curricular adjustments such as these now in order to catch up to how students are currently interacting with media in their everyday lives. They cannot afford to let the gap increase. Teachers who passionately desire their students' effective learning should look into the curricular incorporations mentioned here, or even research their own comics and graphic novels that might suit their own learning goals and objectives. Change must begin somewhere, and the graphic narrative looks like a powerful and positive option.

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